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**Basic Information for Teaching the Old Testament
in English as a Foreign Language**

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New curriculums are being introduced throughout Japan. One recent change at various colleges and universities is the offering of courses in both the Bible and Classical (Greek and Roman) Mythology in English. One of the goals is to give Japanese students the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the foundations of Western Culture and Civilization through these courses. While an excellent idea, there are some challenges involved in determining what to teach and how to make the subject matter palatable to students. This paper, however, will not concentrate on pedagogy, but rather on providing some basic information to help identify a few of the key ideas of the Old Testament and the Jewish tradition. Because the Bible's influence is so vast, only a few points regarding the Old Testament's impact on Western thought will be discussed.¹⁾

Key words: The Bible, the Old Testament, Judaism, Religion, English as a Foreign Language

Introduction

Recently many colleges and universities throughout Japan are forging new curriculums. This has led to some changes in subjects which are taught, including offerings of both the Bible and Classical (Greek and Roman) Mythology in English. The underlying motive is to provide Japanese students with a deeper understanding of the foundations of Western Culture and Civilization, and indeed it is a wise idea. Such courses, however, while extremely interesting, offer special challenges to the teacher.

As the Bible is a huge treatise of both historical and religious import, it is difficult to know where to begin and what to include in the syllabus. The importance of this task is heightened when one considers the effort necessary to comprehend the layers of meaning present in the Old Testament in a foreign language. Biblical language can be hard to decipher even for a native speaker of English, and the meaning extremely obscure to grasp; nevertheless, it is essential to communicate some understanding of this style of language to the students. This paper, however, will not concentrate on the pedagogical approach but rather on providing an overall perspective. It must be noted that this paper is meant to be informative only, and is not intended to offer a contribution to the scholarly debate on the

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Old Testament. As the Bible is so rich, and its impact so great, only a few of its important points will come under discussion. My aim is to place the Jewish religion in perspective regarding other religions of the day, and to show why some of its differences were exceptional.

More than Literature or History-the Impact on Western Thought

The Bible can be viewed as literature and as a historical document, but to deny the fact that it has been used for centuries as a source of inspiration and guidance for generations of Jews and Christians alike is to do the book a great disservice. As William James says in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, "I am neither a theologian, nor a scholar learned in the history of religions, nor an anthropologist. Psychology is the only branch of learning in which I am particularly versed. To the psychologist the religious propensities of man must be at least as interesting as any other of the facts pertaining to his mental constitution." (James, 1902, p. 2) The students must realize that while not everyone believes in these texts, some people do and the stories enclosed are sacred to them.

This is not to say, however, that the Judeo-Christian tradition deserves any more credibility than any other religious tradition. As an ancient king of India once stated, "He who has no respect for other religions has no respect for his own." Moreover, as Sri Ramakrishna, a great saint of India explains,

I say that all are calling on the same God. . . . It is not good to feel that my religion is true and the other religions are false. All seek the same object. A mother prepares dishes to suit the stomachs of her children. Suppose a mother has five children and a fish is brought for her family. She doesn't cook the same curry for all of them. . . . God has made religions to suit aspirants, times, and countries. All doctrines are only so many paths. (M., 1942, p. 559)

According to Huston Smith, "It has been estimated that one-third of our Western civilization bears the marks of its Jewish ancestry." (Smith, 1991, p. 271) There are the names we give our children, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Rebecca, Sarah, Moses, Jeremiah, and Joseph, to name only a few. The United States "carries the indelible stamp of its Jewish heritage in its collective life: the phrase 'by their creator' in the Declaration of Independence; the words 'Proclaim Liberty throughout the land' on the Liberty Bell." (*ibid.*) Yet, as important as the above-mentioned items are, the real impact of the ancient Jews, according to Smith, "lies in the extent to which Western civilization took over their angle of vision on the deepest questions life poses." (*ibid.*) He further asserts that it was the early Hebrews' ultimate search for meaning which has given them such a central role in formulating Western thought.

How the Hebrews Defined their God and Why this Matters

There are three key factors in the way the Jews defined their God, or Yahweh, as God was called. First of all, He was anthropomorphised. He appeared to Adam and Eve in the

Garden of Eden and walked with them. It says in Genesis in the Creation that "God decided to make a creature something like himself. . . . This creature was Man." (Fogge, 1965, p. 5) Man was created in God's image and so it follows that God, while far more powerful, is not that different, and can relate to the human condition with its joys and sorrows: birth, death and the passage of time.

Another aspect of the Hebrew definition of God which separated Judaism from the other religious traditions of the day was their monotheism. Many other religious traditions, such as the Egyptians, Babylonians, and Syrians also had personalized gods, but they had many of them, not just one. There was a god of fire and of water and of sun and of rain, for example. Altering this concept and merging god into a single entity with a supreme will was a major change. As Henri Frankfort describes,

When we read in Psalm 19 that "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork," we hear a voice which mocks the beliefs of Egyptians and Babylonians. . . . In Egypt and Mesopotamia the divine was comprehended as immanent: the gods were in nature. The Egyptians saw in the sun all that a man may know of the creator; the Mesopotamians viewed the sun as the god Shamash, the guarantor of justice. But to the psalmist the sun was God's devoted servant who is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and "rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race." The God of the psalmists and the prophets was not in nature. He transcended nature. . . . It would seem that the Hebrews, no less than the Greeks, broke with the mode of speculation which had prevailed up to their time. (Frankfort, 1946, p. 363)

The third point about Yahweh is that he was a loving god. This is quite different from the sometimes cruel and vindictive qualities we see manifest in the Greek and Roman gods and goddesses. For example, Diana could be merciless if she felt wronged, and Juno, who watched over women and particularly wives, was known for her jealousy. Jupiter fell in love with various mortals and pursued them relentlessly, much to Juno's displeasure. (Sabin, 1958) On the other hand, the god of the Old Testament tried to show human beings mercy, and to protect the vulnerable such as widows and orphans. The foundation of Jewish belief, therefore, according to Smith, is that if life is to be lived in a means that moves one toward fulfillment, God must support humans in that endeavor by being a single, loving entity, and God does. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." (Deuteronomy 6: 4); (Smith, 1991, p. 275).

A Look at the Story of Creation and its Significance

By looking at one story in Genesis in the Old Testament, the story of the Creation, we can learn many things about the Jewish view of life. God created the world in six days, and rested on the seventh, or the sabbath. When He viewed His creation, the Bible says, "... behold, it was very good." Several key points arise from this alone. First of all, the Jewish thirst for meaning mentioned above is retained here as well. They saw physical and

material existence (nature, food, sex, marriage, and possessions) as important and useful. This distinguishes Judaism from Hinduism, for example, which sees the physical plane as 'maya,' an illusory fragment of existence, the veil of which one must break through in order to arrive at illumination and fulfillment. (Grimes, 1996, p. 189-190)

Moreover, when God created man He made "a creature who would have dominion over the earth." As Smith points out, it is no accident that modern scientific thought developed in the West in cultures impacted by both the positive view of nature held by the Hebrews, and also by man's capacity to work within nature for good. (*ibid.*, p. 279) While man's desire to control nature has had a down side with the destruction of the environment, for example, this does not minimize the sacredness of all life as found in the Bible's book of Revelation. As Andrew Harvey aptly points out, "And while it is true that the Book of Genesis in the Bible shows God as giving human beings 'dominion' over nature—a position that has had disastrous consequences—a deeper mystical insight everywhere present in the Jewish revelation shows God as inhabiting every part and particle of nature and of human life within nature, potentially ennobling and sacralizing everything in them." (Harvey, 1996, p. 87)

Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the Temptation of Satan

Another story which explains a lot about the Jewish approach can be seen in the Garden of Eden. There are many metaphors here. First of all, Adam was created from clay, and a *midrashic* legend has it that God took clay from all corners of the earth to ensure the "universality and basic homogeneity of the human race." (Smith, p. 309) Harvey points out that while the Judaic tradition is overwhelmingly masculine, there are nevertheless elements of the feminine found within it if one searches for them. For example, Hokmah, Wisdom, is described in the Old Testament as the consort of Yahweh. Later Kabbalists characterized Shekinah as Yahweh's "Queen" or "Bride." The power of the feminine in Jewish thought can be extrapolized by their hallowing of all of life using prayer and sacred tradition: "in eating, marriage, childbearing, and holy friendship as well as in prayer, contemplation, and ritual worship." (Harvey, p. 88)

The temptation of Satan when Eve and then Adam chose to eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil brings forth another seminal idea in Jewish thought which has impacted all of Western culture, that of free will. The Jews have never questioned free will. In this first recorded act of human life in the Old Testament, Adam and Eve were tempted by the snake, it is true, but they made the choice to eat, human error was at work. According to Smith, "The word *sin* comes from a root meaning 'to miss the mark,' and this people (despite their high origin) manage to continually do. . . . Human beings, once created, make or break themselves, forging their own destinies through their decisions." (Smith, p. 281)

Conclusion

As we have seen from the above discussion, the ideas and values expressed in this very limited look at the Old Testament have greatly impacted Western thought. It is hoped that these concepts can be adequately communicated to students in an English-only environment. In summary, the Hebrews' search for meaning impacted their interpretation of life, and their definition of God or Yahweh separated them from other religions of the day. A single, loving Godhead who transcended nature and who exhibited concern for the welfare of human beings was a major breakthrough in religious ideology. Jewish thought and the Old Testament have contributed much to Western civilization: the celebration of the physical and therefore life on the material plane, the awareness of the sacredness of all of life, man's and woman's likeness in the image of God, the capacity to harness nature, and free will, to name only a few. There are many aspects of the Old Testament and the Jewish tradition which need to be saved for future discussion, such as the importance of history and social change, the power of the prophets, and the Ten Commandments or the moral code.

Note

1. Due to the Bible's antiquity, the language referring to God is usually 'He,' and humans are referred to as 'man,' or 'mankind.' I will leave this as is, with the understanding that the feminine gender is included therein.

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